



PO Box 09400
Detroit, MI 48209
313-842-1961

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Members of the Great Lakes and Environment Subcommittee:

On behalf of Southwest Detroit Environmental Vision (SDEV), I am writing in support of SB 513 and HB 5553 – legislation that will regulate compost facilities in Michigan. Our organization has worked for over fifteen years to improve the environment and economy of Southwest Detroit by facilitating clean-up and reuse of brownfield sites; advocating for improvements in air quality; attacking the problem of illegal dumping; and promoting land use planning decisions that facilitate revitalization of the community.

In the spring of 2006, SDEV became aware of a proposal to locate a compost facility on a former factory site in our community. This plan raised a number of concerns because of the proximity of the site to residential neighborhoods and the Detroit and Rouge Rivers; the large volume of material that was proposed to be processed on a very limited acreage; and the poor track record of the operator in Macomb County. Although our organization recognizes the importance of composting as a method to manage solid waste, for the reasons listed above we strongly recommended to the City of Detroit not to allow this use for the property. Because the property was zoned industrial, the Buildings and Safety Engineering Department made the decision to approve the proposal.

The Buildings and Safety permit required that the Department of Environmental Affairs prepare a Host Agreement to provide oversight to the facility. We obtained a draft of this agreement and were concerned that it was permitting the facility to accept 400,000 cubic yards of material annually to a 10 acre site. Our organization worked diligently to research best practices in composting and found that the recommended volume to ensure proper management and limit odors was 5,000 cubic yards per acre. The appropriate amount for this site would be no more than 50,000 cubic yards. The volume being allowed was eight times greater than this standard. After months of advocacy from the community, the City lowered the amount in the Host Agreement to a still unacceptable level of 200,000 cubic yards annually and on March 28, 2007 gave the facility permission to operate.

Over the past six months residents have been subjected to strong odors from the facility that have interfered with their ability to be outside in their yards. Several residents who lived in the neighborhood adjacent to the facility for their entire lives made the decision to move because their quality of life was so comprised. Workers at the Detroit Water and Sewerage facility located across the street from the compost facility complain of overwhelming odors. The City of River Rouge, which is just south of the facility, filed a lawsuit against the company because odors are impacting its residents so severely. A school truant officer contacted me to report that since the facility has begun operation families are telling her that their children have increased asthma and respiratory problems that are keeping them from attending school.

Southwest Detroit is one of the only areas of the City that is growing in population. Millions of dollars have been invested to revitalize commercial areas and renovate and construct housing. If the negative impacts from this facility continue over time, many more residents may chose to leave the area and the community will be less attractive to potential residents. This exodus could destabilize years of work to revitalize neighborhoods and adversely effect the economic improvements in the community.

The lives of thousands of people are being negatively impacted by this one poorly operated facility. The situation in Southwest Detroit illustrates the need for the legislature to provide protection to the citizens of Michigan by addressing the absence of regulation for compost operations. On behalf of our organization and the residents of Southwest Detroit, I urge the Committee to report SB 513 and HB 5553 for a vote on the House floor. These bills provide a structure to fairly regulate the industry and encourage good management practices. They offer a number of needed provisions that can address the problems our community has experienced including requiring proper siting of facilities; limiting amounts of material that can be accepted to better ensure that it will be managed effectively; and requiring recordkeeping to demonstrate that operations are being performed in a manner that prevents nuisances and minimizes anaerobic conditions that lead to odors.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments.

Respectfully submitted,

Lisa Goldstein
Executive Director
Southwest Detroit Environmental Vision